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## Writing the Public Sphere Through Family/Community History

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## WRITING THE PUBLIC SPHERE THROUGH FAMILY/COMMUNITY HISTORY

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Composition scholars recently have begun to call for a re-imagined role for compositionists as public intellectuals who participate in the public sphere. At the same time compositionists are increasingly advocating writing pedagogies that ask students to investigate and participate in the public sphere—via service learning projects, community-service writing, “real-world” writing for businesses and non-profit agencies, and so on. Susan Wells, Elizabeth Ervin, Peter Mortensen, and Ellen Cushman all, to varying extents, have argued for compositionists to use their rhetorical expertise in public arenas.<sup>1</sup> Wells, one of the most prominent advocates of writing in the public sphere, describes four ways that composition classrooms might be organized around public writing: 1) as a public sphere itself; 2) as a site for analyzing public discourse; 3) as a forum for producing public writing; and 4) as a site for examining how disciplinary discourses intervene in the public sphere (338–339).

In this essay, I’d like to suggest one way to re-imagine what “public” writing might look like in the composition classroom. In order to do so, I draw upon compositionists who locate their work in cultural studies and who focus on “lived experience” and history as a cultural and social production. I argue that such a turn helps to disrupt the boundaries between public vs. academic/personal writing that I see underlying current calls for public writing, thereby opening up possibilities for deeper understandings of what the term “public sphere” can and might mean in students’ lives. I<sup>2</sup> propose a pedagogy that I believe can help students see in concrete ways how their lives are, already, connected to the public sphere in historical and social ways: In this essay, I draw upon a course that I taught during the fall of 1999 in which students were asked to investigate their social locations via family and community history. After describing some of these students’ projects (and some of the tensions that arose in their production), I conclude with a discussion of how these projects spurred me to re-conceptualize what it means to teach writing in and for the public sphere.

### Calls for Public Writing in Composition Pedagogy

Recent calls for composition pedagogies to support “writing in the public sphere” seem undergirded by binary oppositions such as social vs. expressivist rhetorics, personal vs. academic discourses, and public vs. private audiences. Similar to the Bartholomae and Elbow CCC’s exchange that pitted academic writing against personal writing, current discussions about public writing are usually framed in terms of the classroom vs. the community. That is, the classroom is viewed as rhetorically neutral or private while the public sphere is constructed as a richer, more complex and diverse rhetorical space that promotes authentic and invested writing. For instance, the collection *Writing the Community*, which profiles different visions of service learning projects within composition, tends to emphasize student collaboration and “real world” audiences and purposes as the main value for writing in the public sphere. Nora Bacon describes her goals for having students write for nonprofit agencies in these terms: “I was eager to see my students work collaboratively and learn to shape their prose for a ‘real-world’ audience, and they appreciated the opportunity to practice their academic skills in the service of public, socially useful work” (40). Similarly, Wade Dorman and Susan Fox Dorman describe their rationale for having students write a local history for the Baton Rouge Volunteers of America:

... [we] decided to move our writing classes closer to the messy comprehensiveness of the real world, where problems almost never come wrapped in neat packages with clear criteria and specified rewards for solution. We sought a composition pedagogy that would locate students in complex, unpredictable situations. That’s why we had for a long time not assigned students writing topics, but instead given them heuristics for discovering meaningful topics that really existed in the messiness of their lives. And given the reality that people affect each other whether they bowl together or alone, we included the real-world messiness of interdependence. That’s why we were already using workshop-style classes, why we stressed the needs and demands of community in our teaching of communication. (122)

For Dorman and Dorman, a public writing pedagogy encourages students to connect learning with “real world” applications that current writing pedagogies do not provide.

Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere, also writing from the perspective of service learning pedagogies in composition, seek to recover the classroom as a public space, one in which students can begin to articulate and address community issues. Schutz describes his experience in having collaborative student groups choose a problem that bothered them in the world and

writing to an audience connected to that problem. While Schutz and Gore argue that this type of community work is more successful than service learning projects that emphasize tutoring, they also describe limitations with imagining community in these ways. In particular, they note that it is difficult to help students construct “‘public’ projects in conjunction with other communities—generally beyond the university—with different needs and visions of the world” (140). They conclude that “Each public space, to be successful, ... must draw on and be responsible to the local histories, social realities, and individual personalities involved in any particular issue. Public spaces are concretized not by the achievement of some abstract ideal, but by the appropriation of the idea of collective action into a local, messy, and complex context” (142).

As Gere and Schutz suggest, one dilemma that advocates of public writing in the composition classroom face is that students often are not already committed to a particular problem—or even to the belief that they have the right or the skills to participate within the public sphere in addressing such problems. Oftentimes, this lack of exigency is viewed as apathy or resistance or laziness. For instance, Dorman and Dorman describe one student’s frustrations when he was unable to find microfilm references for the Volunteers of America project in these terms:

Here was a “good” student, one who’d done exactly what he was taught to do by exceptional teachers in an elite school, who didn’t know the difference between research—genuine exploration and discovery—and an Easter egg hunt—finding more or less artfully hidden but accessible data. Alienated, he saw no connection between what he was supposedly learning and its actual usefulness in the world outside the composition classroom, where no one would precede him compiling the relevant information he would need to solve problems effectively. (121)

While Dorman and Dorman offer one reading of this student—as schooled into alienation by his previous educational experiences—I believe this student’s frustration might also be read in terms of the disconnection between his own experiences and the purposes for the VOA project. Perhaps he wasn’t committed to looking through five years of microfiche material on the VOA because he saw no connection between his own history, his own exigency for such public writing, and the goals of the community organization for which he and the rest of his class members were writing. Rather than creating opportunities for students to write in the community with pre-established projects, then, another way of framing public writing within the classroom might be in terms of helping students understand the relationship between their own social locations and the exigencies or problems that exist within the public sphere. Before asking students to immediately move into public writing projects (either of their own or of their teachers’ design), I believe it is important to provide

spaces in which students can consider how they are, already, connected to and participating in public spheres through their family and community histories. The course I describe offers one model for how the writing classroom can take up these theoretical issues.

In her analysis of letter writing exchanges between women's rights activists at the turn of the twentieth century, Lisa M. Gring-Pemle argues that much rhetorical work within the "private sphere" serves as a transitional space or as a "pre-genesis" moment for public advocacy. She says that those who analyze social movement theory often fail to consider the importance of such rhetorical groundwork *a priori* to work in the public sphere. In analyzing these letter exchanges, she asks:

[H]ow do individuals come to perceive an exigence, recognize that others share a similar experience, constitute themselves as an audience, and believe that, as a group, they have the power to resolve or address that exigence through discourse designed to transform perceptions of reality? Fundamentally, how do audiences with a collective consciousness come into being? (42)

While Gring-Pemle focuses specifically on the pre-genesis moments in the formation of a collective consciousness for women's rights activists, her questions are also useful for compositionists to consider as they conceptualize public writing projects for their students. Rather than assuming that students are already invested in writing in the public sphere, I believe it's important for teachers to help lay the rhetorical groundwork of such consciousness by providing opportunities to explore points at which students' public and private experiences are already connected.

One way to lay this rhetorical groundwork is by asking students to focus on lived experience as a means of bridging the gap between public and private and of theorizing what writing in the public sphere might entail. David Mahala and Jody Swilky's "Telling Stories, Speaking Personally: Reconsidering the Place of Lived Experience in Composition" is particularly useful in reading the move toward writing in the public sphere. Mahala and Swilky argue that the "polarization of personal and public discourse in the history of composition pedagogy, particularly during the period of the mid-70s through the 80s, creates obstacles to realizing" the potential of personal writing with respect to understanding the self as a sociohistorical subject (367). Analyzing the work of scholars such as Patricia Williams and Jane Tompkins, who use discursive strategies to "present themselves as historically situated subjects exploring how their knowledge has been shaped by lived experience" (364), Mahala and Swilky argue that "... to articulate the personal is to write the self reflexively, as an historical subject who tells stories from lived experience, yet also draws on ways of reasoning, arguing, and writing that empower her as a professional" (364-5). In a similar vein, Lu and Horner argue that compositionists need to sustain tensions between experience and discursive understanding: "expe-

rience is historical and ongoing, constantly reconstituting itself. Thus, we can use experience not simply to affirm our state of being but to raise questions about that material being, to critique and bring about changes in the conditions of our existence and, in turn, to transform our experience" (261). While Lu and Horner's essay ultimately addresses how teacher/researchers might make use of the tensions between research and teaching, their analysis also suggests the necessity of providing students with opportunities to use and theorize experience beyond simply a valuation of the personal, as a means toward participating in and perhaps re-imagining what constitutes the public sphere.

One way of having students examine their lived experiences is through the lens of history. Henry A. Giroux is one critical educator who asserts that historical inquiry enables students to participate more actively in the public sphere. As Giroux suggests, "... history is not merely about looking at facts, dates, and events. It is also about critically examining one's own historical location amid relations of power, privilege, and subordination" (242). With respect to composition pedagogy, some have begun to claim research writing as an avenue for such historicizing to occur. For instance, Matthew Wilson notes the importance of helping students to read history as a contested narrative in order for them to write traditional forms of research essays. Wilson argues that current conceptions of research writing fail to help students understand knowledge as culturally and historically produced, and do not create opportunities for students to understand events from the perspective of local knowledge. Wilson writes that students assigned research papers are often asked to consult sources as authorities or experts whose facts and interpretations aren't open to contest. Yet, he argues, "Events are always already encoded in the narratives that we read and that we view. And it is only when we can begin to read how events come to us pre-encoded in narrative that we can begin to interpret" (668). More recently, Robert Davis and Mark Shadle argue for alternative forms of research writing within composition classrooms. In "Building a Mystery": Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking," they describe a series of four alternatives to the modernist research paper that ask students "to compose within a large range of strategies, genres, and media" (418) and which "mixes the personal and the public and values the imagination as much as the intellect" (422). They note: "Such public/private work preserves the notion that learning is autobiographical, while also sustaining one of the chief lessons of rhetoric—that even the personal scripts in which we think are socially constructed and keep us connected to a shared, if conflicted world" (429). While Wilson and Davis and Shadle have very different visions for what types of research writing should be valued, they agree upon the importance of helping students to historicize their inquiries by emphasizing how knowledge itself is a cultural and social production. In the remainder of this essay, I build upon these discussions by describing a pedagogy that I believe helps students to explore their

own histories as cultural and social productions, foregrounding the tensions between “lived experiences” and “discursive understandings” and highlighting the contested and constructed nature of historical narratives in both public and private spheres.

### Public Sphere through Family History

To illustrate how research writing projects can enable students to participate in the public sphere, I will describe here a first-year writing course at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that is designed to “help students discover and develop uses for writing that will serve them personally, professionally, and academically ... and to help students use writing as a form of thinking and as a means of taking part in public discussions” (Aims and Scope Statement 1). In designing the syllabus, Joy Ritchie and I focused on helping students to understand research as a process of knowing and interpreting connected to one’s own social location rather than as a “presentation” of facts about a topic. We sought to promote research practices that would invite students to explore what constitutes knowledge and evidence in public and private spheres (and relationships between the two) and to consider how their own experiences and histories participate (or not) within these spheres. Finally, we tried to provide a meta-language within the classroom—explicitly using terms such as “representation,” “social location” and “cultural narrative” with respect to students’ reading and writing—as a way of helping them become more conscious of the constructed and contested nature of writing research, particularly historical accounts.

All of the writing projects asked students, in various ways, to explore connections between private and public spheres. In the first essay, students explored their social and cultural locations/identities in American society and the ways that these locations have shaped how they think about and act in the world. The second essay asked them to do a rhetorical analysis of argument in the public sphere—an argument that connected to their own social location/identity and experience. Both of these projects served, to use Gring-Pemble’s term, as “pre-genesis” work for the final project, a multi-stage research investigation to the question: “In what ways is your life, your history, or identity connected to a historical and/or social event/trend of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?” Students were asked to select one historical event or trend in the twentieth century to which they and their family/community was/is connected and to conduct three forms of research (archival, primary, and secondary) in order to analyze representations of this event in private and public spheres and, ultimately, to discuss its impact on their lives. They were required to conduct at least one extended interview with a family/community member, and they were encouraged to find other forms and genres in which the event/trend was represented—such as sto-

ries, poems, photographs, plays, short stories, dance, songs, or artifacts—as a way of thinking about how rhetorical forms are connected to purpose, audience, and style. In addition to creating a text representing their analyses of how this event/trend has been represented and how it has impacted their own life, students gave 10-minute presentations to the rest of the class, outlining their research questions and processes and presenting their analyses and conclusions (see Appendix A for complete assignment). Altogether, the students spent about eight weeks researching, writing, and presenting these projects.

The class books (Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, Ophira Edut’s edited collection *Adios, Barbie*, and Dorothy Allison’s *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*) reinforced for students how research processes are connected to terms such as “representation,” “social location,” and “cultural narrative.” *Into the Wild* is Krakauer’s research account about Chris McCandless, a young man who starved to death in the Alaskan wilderness while trying to live off of the land. The book illuminates the different and often contradictory representations of Chris’s character given by those Krakauer interviewed—as well as questions about the ethics of research and the writer’s relationship to his/her subject in the research process. In *Adios, Barbie*, the authors write from a variety of perspectives about their relationships to their bodies and how their social locations shape their senses of identity in American culture. *Two or Three Things* extends these discussions via an autobiographical memoir about Allison’s family and the various cultural narratives in which she felt trapped until adulthood. Students also read texts more local to their experiences, such as a *National Geographic Magazine* essay titled “Nebraska: Standing Tall Again,” and a University of Nebraska recruitment video. With all of these texts, students examined the rhetorical strategies that the writers were using and considered relationships between knowledge, experience, and social location that these texts illuminated.

Because we designed the multi-genre research project as a means of helping students recognize how they and their families/communities’ histories participate in the public sphere. Joy and I created several stages in the research process where students explicitly reflected upon how their family/community members’ accounts connected to, complicated, or sometimes contradicted more public accounts. For instance, students were asked to write analyses of their secondary sources with questions such as “What problems or controversies surround this event?,” “What specific conflicts exist in the representations of this event?,” and “How are personal descriptions different from “official” or academic accounts?” When students were “writing up” their analyses, we encouraged the use of multiple genres—as a means of helping students to explore more complex representations of the events/trends that they were describing and to engage more fully with the divergent perspectives and narratives that they were encountering. At the end of the semester, students wrote narratives



in which they summarized and analyzed their research processes and, again, considered how social location shaped their interpretations of (the event/trend as well as of others' interpretations in public and private accounts (see Appendix B for the complete assignment).

### Student Response

While Joy and I were optimistic about the goals for this project, students' responses far exceeded our expectations. Their projects represented a stunning breadth and diversity of topics and approaches and the final texts that they created were rich, complicated, and thoroughly compelling. A list of topics students investigated shows this range:

### Students' Topics

- Grandmother's influence on the family based on the Depression and New Deal policies
- Mother's experiences as a Vietnam nurse
- Comparison of two grandfathers in WWII and the different paths their lives took after the War
- A legal battle over student prayer at a high school graduation
- The impact of the Vatican II Council on three generations of a family's religious practices
- Wedding trends in a fifty-year period of one woman's family
- The connections between Einstein, Okinawa, Omaha, atomic bomb, and writer's life
- Comparison of uncles' Vietnam involvement and writer's inability to enlist due to asthma
- Impact of the Red River Flooding on writer's South Dakota hometown
- A father's role in Solidarity movement and resulting prison internment and immigration to US
- Immigration of Germans from Russia to Nebraska and impact on writer's family traditions
- Comparison of open/closed adoption narratives and writer's own experience of being adopted
- Effects of Parkinson's disease on maternal and paternal grandparents and issues of family care
- Impact of polio epidemic on small Nebraska town in late 1940's
- Analysis of smoking habits in three generations of a family including writer's own addiction
- Role of WWII reunions in grandparents' lives and participation by subsequent generations

- Impact of Prohibition on two grandfathers—one a brewery owner, one an alcoholic
- Father's perceptions as a rookie police officer in Omaha during 1960's race riots
- Inclusion of Depression under Disabilities Act and the loss of benefits to writer's family
- Impact of the birth control pill on life choices of three generations of women in one family

The act of developing topics directly raised questions about students' participation in public and private spheres. Initially some students felt that they didn't have any connections to history or they viewed history mainly in terms of "big" events that they didn't feel they had the authority to write about. Many students, for instance, initially focused on family members' participation in wars—from World War II to the Persian Gulf War—perhaps because they have been taught to view history mainly in terms of military conflicts. Part of the challenge in helping students to focus such topics was in helping them see beyond the "master narratives" that are commonly invoked about such conflicts.

For instance, Angela initially chose to write about her grandfather's participation in the Battle of the Bulge during WWII. But since her grandfather had died three years earlier, she wasn't able to interview him about his experiences and her initial draft read like a history book, providing a chronology of events during the Battle but not providing insight into how this experience shaped her grandfather or herself. Upon further questioning, however, Angela revealed that one of the main things that interested her about her grandfather was not his war experience but his devotion to the B Troop 41<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Reunions that are held each year for surviving members. Rather than focusing on a battle within a war, then, Angela examined why troop reunions are valuable to participants and their descendants, moving from an examination of her grandfather's actions in a historical event to the legacy of his participation in the reunions for her and her family. With her shift in emphasis, Angela abandoned the historical texts about the Bulge and instead began to explore literature about the impact of war on families and textual materials, such as poems, songs, and memorial tributes created each year by the B Troop 41<sup>st</sup> Cavalry members. Locating herself in her grandfather's legacy required Angela to shift her research process and to think more about whose voices she wanted to represent in her project:

I had to try and downplay the historical accounts that I found because I did not feel that in my case they were the most important. I stressed more of the soldiers' voices and the reunions because those are the things that have really influenced my life. ... I wanted to represent my grandma as an integral part of the reunions even though my grandpa passed away and also show that my dad and other family members are an important part of the reunions as well.

Margaret faced a similar dilemma when she chose to write about her father's experiences with the Solidarity movement in Poland. A Solidarity activist who was imprisoned for a year in a Polish internment camp, Margaret's father was eventually released and the family immigrated to the United States when Margaret was three. As a writer, Margaret was confronted with a wealth of materials related to her father's political activism as well as more official histories of the Solidarity movement. Despite the fact that the family's immigration had had an obvious impact on her, she was relatively unfamiliar with the history of Solidarity or of her father's involvement. As Margaret reflected in her research narrative:

One problem I faced was that my father assumed I knew a lot about the history of Solidarity already. I had to ask him to back up and clarify things for me many times during the interview. Another problem that I faced was that there was so much information and so many different sources of information, that I was completely overwhelmed at first.

Margaret chose to narrow her focus by using a diary format with two different types of entries in relation to specific historical dates—the “official” history of the Solidarity movement she was finding in public accounts and her father's personal account of his involvement. This format raised interesting questions about the relationship between private and public spheres, particularly with respect to one source of data that Margaret found: excerpts from her mother's letters to her father while he was imprisoned which were published in a British magazine. While these private letters document Margaret's first years of life—describing her first steps, her first words, and her reaction to her father when she visited him in prison—they also represent a form of writing in the public sphere. Excerpts from these letters were published as a means of gaining sympathy for imprisoned Solidarity activists and for eliciting funds to support their families. The excerpts from these letters illuminated for Margaret (and other class members) how experience can be used as “evidence” within the public sphere and the implications for how private experience is accounted for (or not) in public representations of historical accounts.

Of course, examining relationships between public/private spheres did not require writing about such weighty topics. Some students creatively imagined and constructed relationships between public and private spheres that are not typically addressed in discussions about public writing pedagogies. Mark chose the genre of a television show, *Connections*, to construct a playful and informative text that connected his interests in physics and his experiences with growing up in Okinawa with reflections about his idol, Albert Einstein. Using chaos theory to interpret his life, Mark created a collage of three narrative voices represented by different fonts and integrated his analysis with scanned photos of family members and historical figures to support his thesis that Albert Einstein has affected his life in personal and professional ways.

Beyond considering relationships between public and private spheres, this project led several students to consider how representations of historical events in public discourse often do not adequately capture the significance or value of experiences as conveyed to them by family and community members. For instance, Sarah became aware of the differences between her grandmother's account of the impact of New Deal policies and the more public accounts that focused on policy rather than individuals' lives. In her research narrative, Sarah reflected on the tensions she felt in reconciling these two different accounts in relation to her own social location:

My interpretive stance on the New Deal is that it was a savior of the poor. It provided the jobs necessary to restore the hope of the nation and the commodities needed to help the poor survive. It was a surprise to find that the majority of my textual sources ignored the individuals' need for these programs, focusing mainly on the monetary expenditures for the New Deal programs.

Sarah then elaborated on how her text sought to address and account for these tensions:

Upon writing my essay, I wanted to emphasize how the New Deal directly impacted my grandmother's beliefs, and how they, in turn, influenced my family. ... Since many other quotes carried the same theme and tone of FDR's First Inaugural Address, I introduced the textual information with the speech, which followed my grandma's history. My grandmother's voice carries throughout the first half of the essay, then Roosevelt's voice, then my own. Since compassion for the poor is a main theme in all three sections, it is the foreground of the essay, with anti-New Deal opinions in the background. I chose to downplay the contrasting opinions because they did not affect the social location of my family, but rather only provided the alternative view of the New Deal and current politics.

Sarah's analysis of how the New Deal was typically represented in public accounts led her to counteract this devaluing of individuals' experiences by consciously foregrounding her grandmother's narratives.

Writing about a more contemporary event, Katie also developed sophisticated rhetorical awareness regarding issues of representation and social location. Katie's project chronicled her experiences growing up Catholic in a predominantly fundamentalist Methodist small town in Iowa and the frustration she felt over a court battle to have a student-led school prayer at the high school graduation. Katie was particularly incensed that school prayer advocates assumed that all opponents to such a prayer were atheists. Borrowing from Allison's use of epigrams in *Two or Three Things*, Katie began each section of her text with the epigram “They said: I heard,” excerpting quotes from letters to the editor and court transcripts representing the positions of school prayer advocates and then providing her reading of the subtext of these arguments about the role of Christianity in her community. In her initial drafts, Katie passionately chronicled her disgust with the lack of tolerance she felt that advocates of the gradu-

ation prayer exhibited. Yet, during a conference with me, Katie said that while she was very interested in the topic and had found multiple sources for investigating it, she felt that she was simply “presenting” two sides to a debate rather than truly engaging with or learning from these different perspectives. It wasn’t until two weeks later, when a peer group member noted that the tone of her writing seemed intolerant, that Katie began to fully reflect upon her own social location as a researcher and the ways that her representation of the “oppressive Christians” could be read as intolerant. This peer responder’s comment led her to draft a new conclusion to her text where she consciously reflected on the complex meanings that the term “tolerance” can entail with respect to boundaries between religious freedom and educational practices. Writing about her private response to the public accounts of the court battle (including a newspaper account describing the graduation in which a student did lead a school prayer) allowed Katie to reflect more fully upon her position as a researcher.

Beyond examining the differences between public and private accounts of events, this project invited students to consider the ethical ramifications for representing their and their family’s experiences and narratives to more public audiences. For instance, Marissa chose to research the history of the Disability Act because her father, who suffers from severe depression, is unable to work and yet his government disability payments were about to be terminated. In her initial proposal, Marissa described her hesitation in pursuing such a topic

... [M]y family has collected disability because of my father’s inability to hold a job for two years due to his severe depression. I personally know what the government aid and support acts can do to help a struggling family. So what is the problem you may ask? Well, I would rather not get into a lot of detail about my father in a presentation to the class. I am not sure if this can be prevented or not.

Ultimately Marissa chose to explore the topic and, in her final research narrative, noted that her family’s concerns about being publicly represented were connected to the larger issue of how depression is viewed in our culture and the impact of these perceptions for how disability benefits are distributed. She noted that even people who knew her family history and were sympathetic to her father’s condition were still hostile to the idea of providing disability benefits to people with depression. Marissa’s reflections on how audiences might perceive her family led her to a guiding metaphor for her text: perceptions. She chose to frame her project by examining how people’s perceptions about depression shape their attitudes toward people who receive disability aid, including government officials who make judgements about distributing benefits. Thus, Marissa’s initial hesitation to tell family secrets led to a sophisticated analysis of the social attitudes that shape her father’s and other people’s experiences with government social policies.

From an alternative perspective, some students became aware of the limitations in their family members’ accounts of events, representations that were complicated and sometimes contradicted by official public accounts. For instance, Richard said that it was difficult to write about his father’s account of his experiences as a rookie police officer in Omaha during the 1960 race riots because he didn’t want to represent his father as racist. The events that Richard documented as leading to the riot, however, were burdened with racial tensions: the shooting death of a 14-year-old African American girl by a white police officer and the subsequent death of two white police officers by a bomb that was placed in an abandoned warehouse allegedly in retaliation by Black Panther members. While Richard was sympathetic to his father’s experiences, especially the death of two colleagues on his squad, he found it difficult to fairly represent his father’s account, which downplayed the importance of race, in conjunction with more public accounts that emphasized race as a prime factor in the events leading up to the riots. Richard’s representation was further complicated by his own ambivalence regarding the state of racial relations in Omaha today. Thus, Richard’s project engaged him in reflection about interpretation and representation on many different rhetorical levels.

Beyond building students’ rhetorical awareness, this project led to the unforeseen benefit of promoting connections and conversations between students and their families. Students reported that their families were, for the most part, excited about having their histories researched for a class project. Margaret wrote: “I have never seen my dad so excited about anything. I will never forget the spark in his eye as he spoke to me about his history and the happiness he felt when he saw my interest in the subject.” Dane wrote that the project promoted conversations with his mother about his grandfather:

I learned a great deal about my family, and it opened lines of communication that weren’t there before... My mom used to never mention her father. In fact, as you can see from draft to draft, I didn’t even know what his name was. Through this project I found out some painful but necessary information about my family, and it helped shed light on a lot of things that I think about from day to day.

Jacqui wrote that while she knew her mother had served as a nurse in Vietnam, she had never asked her about these experiences and thus had not realized the extent to which these experiences continued to preoccupy her mother on a daily basis. And Garrett wrote that while he was initially hesitant about interviewing his uncles about their Vietnam experiences because of the silence that had always surrounded the topic: “It actually turned out to be a big story time with all the cousins sitting around listening to the stories, and my grandpa and his brother throwing in their bits of wisdom.”



The project also provided avenues for making visible students' academic experiences within the public sphere, with the potential of combating the "discursive entrenchment" that Elizabeth Ervin describes as a problem between academic and nonacademic rhetoricians. For instance, Jessie was so excited about her project—an examination of wedding trends in her family over the course of fifty years—that she brought her mother and grandmother to class on the day she gave her public presentation. In her presentation, she emphasized their contributions to her project and the importance of having them there in person in case other class members had questions to ask of them. After class, Jessie's mom and grandmother commented on how interesting the other students' presentations had been and thanked me for letting them see what their daughter/granddaughter was learning in college. Her mother added that she was excited to see "real people's" experiences were being written about in a college classroom.

### Reconceptualizing Writing in the Public Sphere

In reflecting upon these students' projects, I am led back to the question "What does it mean to ask students to write in the public sphere and how might such work be imagined and carried out in the writing classroom?" At first glance, the writing projects in which Joy and my students were engaged do not seem to represent the forms of writing in the public sphere that compositionists are currently advocating. Our students did not write collaboratively or focus on a common course topic; they did not write documents for public agencies or editorials and letters for outside publication; they were not asked to make public arguments outside of the classroom. Yet, I believe that this course enabled students to explore and expand their understanding about relationships between private and public spheres. By emphasizing research as an act of construction and interpretation connected to one's social location, we saw students develop a heightened sense of how to read accounts, both in the private and public sphere, with respect to who is telling the story, who is recording it, and who is valuing it. We saw students learn to see their own stories and those of their families as a legitimate form of knowledge-making—not simply in terms of affirming the "private" sphere but in developing a rhetorical awareness about how experience and knowledge is constructed and contested, validated or rendered invisible, within both private and public spheres. Finally, although our students were not required to write for public audiences, we saw them use the classroom as a space to practice and experiment with public voices in the "pre-genesis" experience that Gring-Pemle describes. And several students did choose to make their projects public after the class ended. Three students presented their projects at an undergraduate research conference that our institution holds annually and two others performed sections of their projects at an

undergraduate Women's Studies conference. Other students gave their family members bound copies of their projects as presents. But one of the most telling examples of how a student used the classroom to practice her public voice did not come until two years after the class ended when Marissa, who had written about the disability act and her father's alcoholism and depression, asked me to read over her application essays to medical school. Marissa asked for my feedback on her response to an optional question: "Have you faced any extenuating circumstances or hardships in your life that have affected your academic career?" Marissa said that while she was reluctant to depict herself as a "victim," she found it important to write about the impact of her father's alcoholism and depression in her life. She said that writing about her father in her research project had prepared her to make her experiences public to readers other application essays, especially because she feels that negative attitudes about her father's condition need to be confronted within the medical community. While Marissa originally had hesitated to write about her father for her research, now she is not only prepared to make such knowledge public, she sees it as part of her responsibility to intervene in the discourses that impact how others read her father. Marissa's email conversations highlighted for me that just because teachers can't see students engaging in public work during a semester doesn't mean that they aren't developing skills and strategies that they can use for their own public purposes. By emphasizing writing practices that value experience as an historical, social, and ongoing process of knowledge-making, we believe students can develop rhetorical awareness of and strategies for participating in discourses that exist in private and public spheres—and perhaps disrupting and remaking the boundaries between them.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Peter Mortensen calls for compositionists to be public intellectuals who disseminate research for public and local audiences (such as lawmakers, school districts, and state agencies) concerned about literacy (195). Elizabeth Ervin explores the risks of engaging in such public discourse, suggesting that academics need to be prepared to have their authority questioned and "risk being persuaded" in a public forum (467). Beyond disseminating research to public audiences, Ellen Cushman proposes activist research methodologies as a means of breaking down barriers between universities and communities and promoting civic participation.

<sup>2</sup> While this text is singularly-authored, the course that I describe was collaboratively imagined and designed with my colleague and friend, Joy Ritchie. During the fall of 1999, we both taught versions of this course using similar prompts and activities and throughout the semester we discussed issues arising in our classes.

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